

**A CULTURE IN PAPER****Saul Steinberg: "a way of reasoning on paper"**

**Art is a sphinx. The beauty of the sphinx is that you yourself must do the interpreting. When you have found an interpretation, you are already cured. The mistake people make is to believe that the sphinx can give only one answer. Actually, it gives hundreds of answers, or maybe none at all. Interpretation probably does not give us the truth, but the act of interpretation saves us.**

*Saul Steinberg (Pierre Schneider, Louvre Dialogues, Atheneum, New York 1971).*

Nico Zardo

When people define Saul Steinberg as a cartoonist... I tend to smile. Because commonly, a cartoonist is considered a "light" artist, a second-rate artist. I am firmly convinced that it is much easier to make people cry than to make them laugh, so I think that anyone who possesses the art of arousing some good humor is a good artist. Someone who, like Steinberg, succeeds in communicating, through a refined and intelligent drawing, in a light-hearted but inexorable way, ideas and concepts that it would take a good writer pages and pages to transmit, well, this person just has to be a "great" artist.

"YOU DRAW LIKE A KING" the great architect Le Corbusier once said of him. This and the many other comments of appreciation bestowed on him by internationally renowned intellectuals, from American critic Harold Rosenberg to Saul Bellow, to art historian Ernst Gombrich, to Italo Calvino, to Eugène Ionesco, to Roland Barthes, who have written about him and about his drawings, have consecrated Saul Steinberg as one of the greatest artists of the 20th century. Differently from classical artists, undoubtedly important but often famous only in a restricted realm, Steinberg has earned, thanks to the presence of his works in newspapers and magazines for over sixty years, a diffused popularity and great success with the public. The famous poster with the cover of "The New Yorker" in 1976, View of the World from 9th Avenue, sold over 25,000 copies!

A GOOD PORTION OF HIS PRODUCTION IS COMPRISED OF DISTINCTLY CLEAR DRAWINGS where a continuous line depicts "man", alone or in relation to a context just hinted at, communicating traditional human contradictions in sudden but yet deep fashion.

Steinberg's friend, the poet Charles Simic, remembers his works: "He drew a labyrinth and himself in it. He drew a left hand drawing the right hand while the right hand drew the left hand at the same time. He drew a man crossing himself out with a pen. He drew the letter E sitting at a table and eating the letter A (...) "<sup>1</sup>. Steinberg himself in a conversation with Jacques Michel describes his work: "(...) I invented a language that did not exist before as a language. I found a raw material in the drawing and used it to express certain poetic or philosophical ideas (...) explaining that the drawing made with India ink is different as a language from the drawing made using a pencil or a felt-tip pen. (...) I tried to find symbols to say certain things. Some things that could sometimes have been said in words, but with much more effort and above all through a medium that has often been abused. This is the drama of poets. And also the beauty of their art "<sup>2</sup>.

ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING ASPECTS, that has unleashed a horde of imitators of Steinberg's activity, concerns his ability to innovate conceptually and formally as well as by mixing techniques and materials. Besides traditional means like ink, pencil, charcoal, pastels and watercolors, he used packing materials, paper bags to produce a long series of masks (documented in the photos by Inge Morath), rubber stamps of people, birds, crocodiles used as reiterated impressions. He "invented" diplomas, passports and actual declared "fake certificates" which for this reason are all the more transgressive.

SAUL STEINBERG, BORN IN ROMANIA IN 1914, had to have absorbed a love of paper, cardboard, alphabets and stamps from his father, a typographer-bookbinder who later manufactured cardboard boxes. From 1933 to 1940 he is in

Milan where he attends the Faculty of Architecture, begins his activity as draftsman by publishing gag cartoons in the humor newspaper "Bertoldo".

To escape racial persecution he leaves Italy, to which he will always remain tied, returning often. His first drawing is published in "The New Yorker" in 1941, before he had even arrived in America. By 1942, he establishes himself in New York and begins a collaboration with the magazine that will last his entire life, producing almost 90 covers and 1200 drawings.

IN 1943/44, DURING SERVICE WITH THE US NAVAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE O.S.S., HE IS SENT TO INDIA, CHINA, NORTH AFRICA, ITALY: during the trips, he never stops exercising his uncontrollable curiosity and continues fixing on paper the particular characters and moments of those countries. His passion for traveling, which will take him to many parts of the world, will give rise to portfolios published in magazines, some of them republished in Steinberg's own books. During one of his trips, he meets the writer Saul Bellow in Nairobi who reveals to us the reason for the almost obsessive presence of crocodiles in Steinberg's drawings. In the course of an excursion to Murchison Falls, Steinberg happened to meet an English biologist expert in crocodiles whose activity interested the artist very much. The following day, during a boat trip along the river, Steinberg barely escaped the aggression of a crocodile!

IN PARALLEL WITH HIS WORK FOR MAGAZINES, Steinberg advances his museum and gallery career starting in 1943, which eventually leads to series of exhibitions, among which an important retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1978 and, following the artist's death in 1999, "Saul Steinberg: Illuminations" in 2006, the first art historical overview of his work. In 1954 Steinberg participates in the Milan "Triennale" by producing a spiraling Children's Labyrinth and in 1958 a collage entitled "The Americans" for the US Pavilion at the Brussels World Fair.

WE OF THE PERINI JOURNAL CAN SOMEHOW CONSIDER OURSELVES CONNECTED TO SAUL STEINBERG. When the director of the magazine "Abitare", Italo Lupi, scheduled a special issue of the magazine on New York, he looked for Steinberg to ask him to illustrate the cover, but he could not be reached. An incurable disease would soon afterwards cause Steinberg's death. To replace him, Mr. Lupi called Guido Scarabottolo, collaborator of the PJJ for over twenty years, who was understandably moved "to pick up" the Great Master's pencil. He produced an illustration inspired by Steinberg's famous architectural perspectives. •

1. Charles Simic, "Saul Steinberg", in "Adelphiana", n. 2, 2003.
2. In "Le Monde", March 22nd, 1979 (courtesy translation).